

Disturbing questions in thwarted US plane bombing

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The nearly catastrophic attempt to blow up a US passenger jet during its final approach to Detroit Metro Airport on Christmas Day raises a number of serious questions.

While many details of the attempted terror attack and the biography of the would-be suicide bomber remain sketchy, widely-reported facts that have been corroborated by US officials make clear that the near-destruction of the airliner was the result of a colossal and as yet unexplained security failure.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a 23-year-old Nigerian, was overpowered by other passengers and crew members when he attempted to set off an explosive device he had taped to his person and smuggled onto Northwest Flight 253 from Amsterdam.

In November, or six months ago (press accounts differ), Abdulmutallab's father, a retired banker and former Nigerian government minister, told US Embassy officials in the Nigerian capital that he was concerned about his son's extreme religious views and activities. The *Washington Post* on Sunday quoted a "senior administration official" as saying the father had warned of his son's "radicalization and associations." Some press reports say the father also spoke with US intelligence officials and Nigerian security agencies.

The family had evidently lost contact with Abdulmutallab, who six months ago said he was breaking off relations. Family members reportedly said they believed he had gone to Yemen, the birthplace of his mother.

US officials say that as a result of the father's warning, Abdulmutallab was placed on a counter terrorism database in November, but they nevertheless had no actionable grounds for barring him from flying or subjecting him to any special pre-boarding search or questioning.

The media is dutifully and uncritically parroting these explanations, but they strain credulity. Since 9/11, there have been innumerable reports of people being barred from flying by government security officials for no apparent reason. One of these was the late Senator Edward Kennedy, who in 2004 was placed on the Homeland Security Department's "no-fly" list and prevented from boarding a shuttle from Washington DC to Boston.

Yet despite being identified as a potential terrorist threat by his own father, a highly placed former Nigerian official, Abdulmutallab was allowed to retain his multi-entry US visa, board a plane to the US, and smuggle explosives on board.

The incident is all the more disturbing and suspicious, coming just weeks after President Obama announced a major escalation of the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan and singled out Yemen and Somalia as alleged Al Qaeda bases where US military attack could be justified.

This episode has the appearance of another in a series of ostensible security lapses which have more the character of deliberately turning a blind eye than mere incompetence. The case of Abdulmutallab seems to follow a well-established pattern dating back to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. A number of the hijack-bombers were known to US intelligence and security officials as Al Qaeda operatives, and were nevertheless allowed to enter the country, train as pilots, and eventually board the doomed airliners on 9/11. Warnings of impending terror attacks involving the hijacking of airplanes went unheeded.

None of this has ever been explained. No one has been held accountable. Instead, numerous government investigations were carried out, culminating in the 9/11 Commission report, which whitewashed government

agencies and officials. Notwithstanding Obama's pledge to investigate last week's attempted terror attack, the 9/11 pattern will likely be repeated.

The latest episode occurs within days of US air attacks against insurgents in Yemen, which US officials and the media are increasingly portraying as a center of Al Qaeda activity nearly on a par with the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.

The linking of Abdulmutallab to Yemen is an ominous sign that these attacks will increase, and the country may well become a new front in the expanding drive by the US to dominate oil-rich, strategic regions in the Middle East and Central Asia. This danger was underscored by statements from politicians and the media over the weekend.

Jane Harman, the Democratic congresswoman from California who heads the House Homeland Security subcommittee, issued a statement declaring, "The facts are still emerging, but there are strong suggestions of a Yemen-Al Qaeda connection and an intent to blow up the plane over US airspace."

The *New York Times* wrote in its news account Sunday, "If corroborated, Mr. Abdulmutallab's travel to Yemen for terrorist instruction and explosives underscores the emergence of that country as a major hub for Al Qaeda, perhaps beginning to rival the terror network's base in Pakistan."

The attempted plane bombing is also being used for domestic propaganda purposes. Under conditions of popular opposition to the expanding war in Afghanistan, government officials and the media are already seeking to use it to cow and frighten the population so as to justify both foreign wars and increased attacks on democratic rights at home. Once again, Al Qaeda is being summoned up to make the American people more willing to accept restrictions on their personal freedoms.

That a Nigerian national was involved in last week's attempted plane bombing underscores the global consequences of Washington's militarist policies. While nothing can justify terrorist attacks against civilians, Washington's neo-colonial wars are responsible for creating the conditions for new recruits for terrorist operations.

What has been reported about Abdulmutallab's biography is evidence of this fact. The young student, from a privileged and wealthy family, seems to have

been radicalized in tandem with the escalation of US military violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He left his family home in London's West End, broke off relations and disappeared during the period when it had become clear that the Obama administration was continuing and intensifying the warmongering policies of Bush.



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